



DOSTOEVSKY: A journey in the company of his villains in a quest for our own humanity

A presentation by Dr. Olga MEERSON, Associate Professor of Slavic Languages, Georgetown University, author of *Dostoevsky's Taboos*

Presented by Crossroads Cultural Center & co-sponsored by Columbia Campus Ministry

Crossroads: Good evening, and welcome on behalf of the Crossroads Cultural Center. We would like to thank our co-sponsor the Columbia Catholic Ministry. We are pleased to have with us Prof. Olga Meerson.

Dostoevsky is truly one of "our" authors, a writer who expressed prophetically the great struggle that we also face. It has been said that the history the last hundred years has simply been the unfolding of the great ideologies of the XIX century: scientism, socialism, individualism, progressivism. While all of them at some level present an option for atheism, what was clear to Dostoevsky is that what is really at stake in the modern world is humanity. Paradoxically, the attempt to remove God ends up eliminating humanity, by denying that most profound dimension of our being which is freedom. Dostoevsky realized that to be human means to be a relationship with the Infinite, with the Mystery, which calls to mind a quote from *The Possessed* which was dear to Fr. Giussani, "The whole law of human existence consists of making it possible for man to bow down before what is infinitely great. If man were to be deprived of the infinitely great, he would refuse to go on living, and die of despair." This deprivation of the Mystery, and thus the withering away of freedom, is truly the predicament of modern man. But the Mystery does not give up on us, and keeps creeping back into history and calling our freedom back to Himself. Few writers have been as aware of this drama as Dostoevsky, and for this reason he is for us still today a guide and a teacher of humanity.

After our homage to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn for his relentless love for freedom this past March, this event on Dostoevsky and the unique greatness of the "I" (as we will see) is the second step on a journey that will bring us to explore, in the next couple of years, some other fascinating aspects of the Russian culture, aspects that we believe are relevant to us:

The next step will highlight the belonging to a people as the essential dimension of the individual in a few Russian composers, followed by the beauty of the "icons" as a unique representation of the relationship between the creature and the Mystery of God. Finally, the status of the dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox church in light of the apostolate of Pope Benedict XVI and the Patriarch of Moscow.

I now leave the task to introduce Dr. Meerson to our good friend John Romanovsky, our moderator tonight. John is a doctoral candidate in theology at the Catholic University of America currently finishing a dissertation on the 19th-century Russian philosopher, Vladimir

Soloviev. He's also currently the Director of Media Technology at the Diocese of Rockville Centre on Long Island.

Romanowsky: Thanks very much. It's a great honor to introduce Dr. Olga Meerson and to welcome her back to her Alma Mater here at Columbia University. I'm especially grateful for the opportunity because she's a dear friend. Since I've moved to New York, I haven't been able to see her very often.

Dr. Meerson was born in 1959 in Moscow and emigrated to Israel in 1974, where she completed her high school education at the Hebrew University High School in Jerusalem in 1977. She subsequently moved to the United States and received her B.A. in Liberal Arts from Hunter College in New York City (1984) and received her M.A. (1986) and Ph.D. (1991) in Russian Literature from Columbia University.

She is married (1977—present) to Fr. Michael Meerson, a Russian Orthodox priest and theologian and they have three children: Elijah, Elizabeth, and Simeon.

Dr. Meerson's interests range from Old Testament exegesis (she is fluent in Hebrew) to Russian Orthodox liturgical poetics and musicology (she served as a reader and choir director in a Russian Orthodox parish for 15 years), to Ilya Zdanevich, Andrei Platonov, and contemporary Russian women writers, especially poets.

Her strongest professional asset is her ear. She is particularly interested in far-reaching philosophical and theological consequences of close readings of literary texts, as well as in the hidden motivation for apparent non-sequiturs.

Although she knows well and enjoys teaching 19th Century Russian Literature, her interest in Dostoevsky (and, even more so, in Gogol) stems from her fascination with the 20th and even the 21st century.

Since 1987 (and since 1995 at Georgetown), she has taught a wide variety of courses in Russian and in English. She is the author of *Dostoevsky's Taboos* published by Dresden University Press.

Just before I turn the floor over to our distinguished guest, I would like to give a very brief synopsis of Dostoevsky's biography. Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky was born October 30, 1821, in Moscow, the second of seven children. His father was an army surgeon, who was murdered when his own serfs poured vodka down his throat until he died.

Dostoevsky graduated from the Academy of Military Engineers, but chose a career in writing over the Russian military. At the age of 25, he published his first original work, the widely-acclaimed short novel, *Poor Folk*.

He later turned to a materialist atheism and joined a socialist secret society, the Petrashevsky group. On April 23rd, 1849, he was arrested with other members and sentenced to death. After 8 months of solitary confinement, they were led to their execution where at the last minute the reprieve was sounded. His sentenced had been changed to 8 years hard labor in Siberia, followed by 4 years of military service. During the latter, he married Marya Isaeva and returned to St. Petersburg.

This near-execution and imprisonment led to a spiritual transformation out of which grew Dostoevsky's great novels.

After his release, he published *Memoirs from the House of the Dead* and two years later, *Notes from Underground*.

In that same year, both his wife and brother died, leaving him with debts and dependents. An attempt to win money through gambling only left him in more debt. He went abroad to escape his creditors, where with the help of his second wife, Anna Snitkin, he published *The Gambler*, and the very successful *Crime and Punishment*.

This second marriage brought Dostoevsky professional and emotional stability. Anna tolerated his compulsive gambling, managed his career, and nursed him through depression and epilepsy. His great works, notably *The Idiot* (1868), *Demons* (1871-1872, also known as *The Devils* or mistranslated as *The Possessed*), and *The Brothers Karamazov*, were all written in this last phase of his life.

Dostoevsky died from his epilepsy on January 28, 1881. At the funeral procession in St. Petersburg, his coffin was followed by thirty to forty thousand people. His epitaph reads, "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit," which is the quotation Dostoevsky chose for the preface of *The Brothers Karamazov*. Dostoevsky is one of the first writers to explore the ideas of psychoanalysis in his works. His religious ideas are still relevant in theological debate. He also is one of the seminal creators of existentialism. Despite his varying success during his lifetime, today Dostoevsky is considered to be one of the preeminent novelists of all time.

And with that, please join me in welcoming Dr. Olga Meerson.

Meerson: Thank you. I would like to start by addressing and somewhat contesting the introductory words, first of all the notion that “Dostoevsky (1821-1881) is truly one of ‘our’ authors, a writer who expressed prophetically the great struggle that we also face.” Yes and no. The expression “ours” has been compromised in Dostoevsky’s *Demons* as a political party-designation of sorts. Being “one of us” and being God’s differ greatly for him. Before he was sentenced to death and pardoned at the very last moment, together with his fellow Petrashevsky group radicals (joined them in 1846, arrested and sentenced to death in 1849), he had been very actively involved in that movement, sincerely believing that a revolution—or what passed for one during those, rather old fashioned times—would change Russia and the rest of the world for the better. After his last-minute pardon, he changed his mind. He did not become any more conservative, pro-imperial, or right-wing, no. He simply started forming judgments according to the “vertical” dimension, not any horizontal political spectrum. But being engaged as “ours”, as opposed to “theirs”, is not a priority for him. Liudmila Saraskina, whom the present audience knows because of Solzhenitsyn and whom I know as a fellow Dostoevsky scholar, has an article titled “Dostoevsky: Who Owns Him?” Her claim is that, if anyone does, it is not a human being but God Himself.

And yet, as Dr. Nancy Workman, my friend and former fellow graduate student here, at Columbia, once said, while answering someone’s question about Dostoevsky having been at one point sentenced to death, “yes, in fact, all of his major work is posthumous”. In what sense? Something has happened in the Siberian prison that caused him to write *Notes from the House of the Dead*, a work that many have compared to Dante’s *Commedia*. Of course, factually neither work is posthumous; both writers were alive and around to write them. And yet... Their vision is mystical and goes beyond this, visible and earthly world. Both populate their works with sinners, many of whom they love. Of course, Dante is seeing people who are, for the most part, already dead, or at least he is presenting them as already dead, so, for the purpose of his plot, his “posthumous” world is not metaphorical — mythical, yes, but “for real”, not “for pretend”. Dostoevsky, on the other hand, *seems* to create a powerful metaphor out of *his* “House of the Dead”, a metaphor for Nicholas’ I’s prisons. But is this a metaphor? Here there is a huge difference between viewing this World of the Dead from the outside — as a series of anthropological observations “on the mores and daily life of Siberian prisoners” — as opposed to seeing their world as the internal world of their conscience, sometimes operating within their souls subconsciously but determining their reactions and verbal behavior. This, internal world of every person’s conscience can be externalized and turned into a literary plot, a series of events, often even of adventures, in one way only — as an archetypal myth. In myth, there are no metaphors, as all the symbols and universals and archetypes are presented as events in a plot. Myths are “pre-poetic” because they don’t use tropes but mean things literally but they are very poetic because all their literal imagery has a huge symbolic and symbolizing potential. That is what Dante’s *Commedia* and Dostoevsky’s “posthumous” poetics share. Like myths, both of these corpuses of works depict the landscape of the soul, dead but striving to come back to life, to make peace with its conscience, and to cry to God, in order to be resurrected, *de profundis*—

from the depths of hell itself, from the Hebrew Sheol, from Hades. In Greek, this word means both the grave and the netherworld—hence the two versions of the Nicene Creed — “and suffered, and was buried”, and “and suffered, and descended into hell” — being not only compatible but meaning the same thing.

So, how does Dostoevsky retrieve and restore myth from metaphor? How does he resurrect the *literal* relevance of symbols for *each* of our penitent souls, personally, not socially? Let us examine one of the most Dantesque passages in *The House of the Dead* — to see how sinners and villains, literal, not metaphorical — make Dostoevsky’s narrator rediscover something about his own conscience:

One of the most famous and picturesque descriptions of the Siberian prison’s daily horrors is the description of the prison’s bathhouse. Dostoevsky’s narrator overtly compares it to hell (IV:98-99). Moisej Al'tman, Leo Shestov, Joseph Frank, Robert Jackson, and many of Dostoevsky's readers, both his contemporaries and ours, have found this comparison appropriate.¹ When, however, the same narrator, in his capacity as the protagonist, makes this comparison while addressing Petrov, another character in the book, Petrov does not find it appropriate. He seems to dismiss it without any comment — as we all would dismiss, or pretend to ignore, a *faux pas*. Gorianchikov (the narrating protagonist) says:

It occurred to me that if all of us together ever turned up in the infernal furnace [*v pekle*], it would very much resemble this place here. I could not restrain myself from imparting this guess of mine to Petrov; he only looked around and remained silent [*on tol'ko pogliadel krugom i promolchal*] (IV:99).

Petrov reacts to Gorianchikov's comment with silence and gesture that are conspicuous. Dostoevsky intends them to be considered conspicuous both by Gorianchikov and by the reader. Petrov refuses to comment on what is "in the air," i.e., on what is every prisoner's "sore spot."ⁱⁱⁱ The fact that Gorianchikov "*cannot restrain himself* from imparting his guess" suggests his insensitivity to the implication of his comment for his listener. It also suggests the inappropriateness of this comment: "could not restrain" (*ne uterpel, chtoby ne soobshchit'*) implies "should have restrained." These two features — the inappropriateness of the speaker's absolutely valid and logically relevant comment and the listener's rather unexpected dismissal of the inappropriate comment — create the scenery of a typical and marked taboo violation, indeed, of a real social *faux pas*. In social encounters, the more sensitive we are to obscene (or simply unutterable) words, the more we pretend not to hear them. Petrov's silence and eye-gesture pinpoint and define *what precisely* should not be communicated in words; he thus uses these means of non-verbal communication to signal both the presence of a taboo and its significance.

What then is the taboo that Petrov cannot bear Gorianchikov to violate? As with Dante, the title of Dostoevsky's book also suggests the importance of after-death imagery. (*The House of the Dead* is not merely a metaphor but, quite literally, resembles Lucian's *Conversations in the Kingdom of the Dead*). Turgenev, Herzen, Robert L. Jackson and others regard the whole book as Dantesque and consider Dostoevsky's comparison of prison and hell to be valid and important.ⁱⁱⁱ Petrov, however, does not react to Gorianchikov's comment as "appropriately" as these writers do. Is this because he is less sensitive to the aptness of this comparison of prison to hell than the readers and Gorianchikov are — or because he is, in fact, more — much more — sensitive to it than anyone outside his personal experience can possibly ever be? The fact that Petrov treats this comparison as taboo also strengthens rather than refutes the validity and importance of Gorianchikov's observation — but through the means of turning it into Petrov's personal "sore spot." When the narrator compares prison to hell *addressing the reader*, he creates a powerful *simile*, thus still operating in a "safely" metaphorical world. We as readers may feel that we are reading about prisoners, not about ourselves. The narrator says *to the reader* that the bathhouse in his prison resembles hell as one usually depicts it, and therefore, that prisons in general might resemble hell. When, however, as the character Gorianchikov, he addresses a *fellow* inmate, he hazards a guess about "us," i.e., the prisoners as a group with a distinct identity of which he partakes (*my vse vmeste*). To Petrov he says: "Our hell is going to be like *our* prison's bathhouse." The thought about one's personal hell, and the degree to which this earthly prison embodies it, apparently haunts the minds of prisoners like Petrov — and thus testifies to the existence of a conscience in their hearts. After all, Petrov ended up in Siberia because of homicide — as, incidentally, did our anthropologically and sociologically savvy narrator Gorianchikov himself! Another character, M., describes Petrov as a horrible murderer. Petrov impresses M. as

[T]he most resolute and fearless of the prison mates, [...] capable of anything. He would not stop at anything if a whim came to him. He would butcher you too, if he happened to feel like it, just for nothing, deadpan; and he would never repent for it (IV:84).

Gorianchikov states his agreement with M., despite his personal feeling that Petrov is friendly to him.

Petrov's identity as a horrible thief and his sensitivity to the issue of eternal damnation suggest parallels between his story and the Gospel episode of the Wise Thief who says on the cross that he deserves it and immediately asks Christ to remember him in the afterworld.^{iv} In bk.2, Ch.5, the narrator refers to this Gospel intertext directly, specifically mentioning that the

prisoners as a group experience an affinity with the Wise Thief (IV:177). (The episode involves their attendance at church on Holy Thursday, at the Last Supper Liturgy, when the chief prayer sung and said is the following: “Of Thy Mystical Supper, o Son of God, accept me today as a communicant, for I will not speak of Thy Mystery to Thine enemies, neither like Judas will I give Thee a kiss, but like the Thief will I confess Thee: Remember me, o Lord, in Thy Kingdom”). This Scriptural and Liturgical reference to the Wise Thief provides the reader with a personal, rather than a social perspective on both the prisoners' conscience and the notion of heaven and hell. It strengthens the motif of personal retribution for one's deeds even more than the other, Dantesque reference does. Petrov and the rest of the prisoners identify with the Wise Thief because they dread *real* hell.

Petrov's sore spot, therefore, is not the *metaphor* of hell for the prison house *per se* but the fact that he probably *does* believe that he personally deserves eternal damnation, as well as this hell on earth. By mentioning Petrov's sore spot, Gorianchikov behaves tactlessly — even if this means that he is also insensitive to the voice of his own conscience. The fact that the narrator's insensitivity about an issue might concern himself as well does not really change the matter greatly: Petrov perceives even this insensitivity better than does the narrator himself.^v As the Wise Thief intertext suggests, many prisoners probably feel as Petrov does, secretly believing that in their lives, subjectively, prison is, *literally, not figuratively*, the hell which they have received as the immanent retribution for their deeds. But no narrator should *enunciate* this feeling, making it into a *social, expressed definition* — instead of a matter of one's *personal self-condemnation* — let alone a narrator who is actually *one of them*, i.e., one of “*us, sinners*”! Gorianchikov as fellow-prisoner should not have said to Petrov what he said as narrator to the reader because treating the two addressees — the reader and a *fellow* prisoner — equally implies an *equality between social criticism* (“Nicholas I's prisons resemble hell”) and *ontological insight* (“you and I deserve hell”). These two, in Dostoevsky's world, are never the same. The former is characterized by using metaphorical language, while the latter is “raw”: in one's conscience, things are meant literally.

Herein lies not only our similarity with the narrator but the distinction between him and the author. Unlike his Gorianchikov, Dostoevsky carefully distinguishes between *social* criticism and *ontological* speculation on the issue of divine retribution for one's sins. This distinction between Dostoevsky and Gorianchikov as his unwary narrator probably determines the specific character of the narration in *The Notes from the House of the Dead*. The narrator Gorianchikov too is a murderer, according to the plot of *The House of the Dead*, but he forgets all about his conscience when he begins to talk in the language of generalities about the critique of the prison! Interestingly, when it comes to Gorianchikov's own capacity *as murderer* (he murdered his wife), he is a seasoned tabooer, someone very different from the novice who carelessly mentions hell to

Petrov in a rather dilettantish manner. By carefully listening to the inserted story of "Akul'ka's Husband," and by seemingly carelessly using it to *interrupt* his own storyline, Gorianchikov signals his personal sore spot in a manner typical of a tabooer — dissociating himself from this sore spot as much as possible. In fact, he dissociates from it too much: the insert seems somewhat unmotivated in the structure of his "notes".^{vi} For our purposes as readers, this is an important fact. Like Gorianchikov, we may believe that all we are doing by getting acquainted with the world of the House of the Dead is merely an anthropological exercise — an *external* study of prison mores. We may even come to believe we are immune to the sins of those who cannot bear talking about those very sins — until and unless we suddenly discover that we are just like these sinful characters, facing the same conviction, and perhaps for a similar crime! Like Gorianchikov, listening and recording a story that seems nothing to do with him — about another husband who killed his wife — we think the story does not have anything to do with us. We forget that this seemingly detached narrator is in Siberia because he too killed his own wife — because he himself has forgotten about that fact while listening to that story. But perhaps we are listening to his story the way he has listened to that, inserted one? The resulting experience is that we intuitively sense that the external, anthropological view of the prison (hell!) described is as wrong for us as it is for the narrator Gorianchikov! We have been implicated in self-righteousness, subliminally and subconsciously!

The distinction between the social issue of a hellish prison and every convict's meta-social taboo on mentioning real hell permeates all of Dostoevsky's taboos. It also entails another specifically Dostoevskian taboo, the only taboo that occurs in various forms in all his novels: thou shalt not judge.^{vii} Petrov may be a villain but it is through his own sore spot — the one within his conscience that makes him see hell as literal and not metaphoric — that we get to experience what it means to be in pain, tormented by *one's own* conscience.

The gap between Gorianchikov's social and Petrov's metasocial understanding of Gorianchikov's comment reveals a very important feature of Dostoevsky's poetics: he uses puns for teaching a moral lesson. The same word "infernal furnace" (*peklo*) signifying hell *both* metaphorically *and* literally but as two separate and distinct referents, is what Mikhail Bakhtin identified as the "double-voiced word"^{viii}. As such, *the signified* of this word may contain two messages at once, the social and the meta-social, without letting these two messages ever conflate or be confused. Dostoevsky's social message shows that particular human vices may be prompted by the defects of the particular society described by him (such as Nicholas I's Russia) but his meta-social message reveals the aspect of these vices which has become common to *all* people after the fall of Adam — including the narrator Gorianchikov himself—and, yes dear reader, you and me as well!^{ix} It is this meta-social message that Dmitry Chizhevsky defines as Dostoevsky's "Patristic Anthropology," which consists of understanding that *any* human soul has many levels.^x This anthropology pertains to the ontological realm and has little in common with social criticism. Like the Divine and the Human nature in Christ, in Dostoevsky's poetics

these two approaches to human nature — the universally anthropological or meta-social, and the historico-social — are *unconfusedly yet inseparably united*.^{xi}

This latter point affords an interesting take on *Demons* (known as *The Possessed*). If the novel is about 1860s Russian radicals and the political underlying of terrorism, it is indeed “the Possessed” we are talking about. If, however, the novel is about demons who toy around with human souls, including the souls of those radicals and nihilists — i.e., about the *spiritual* underpinnings of terrorism — then, being a spiritual treatise, it should be called *Demons* — just as Dostoevsky indeed called it in Russian! In that case, demons are not metaphorical, not a label to use on the radicals or anyone possessed, but literal. Rather, the possessed ones then transpire as incidental — just the current prey for this particular attack by demons! Prey—not even perpetrators! Such is the difference between reading this novel as a political pamphlet vs. regarding it as an exercise in “Patristic Anthropology”.

It has been said that the history the last hundred years has simply been the unfolding of the great ideologies of the XIX century: scientism, socialism, individualism, progressivism.

This is indeed something Dostoevsky addresses but as a spiritual, and therefore anthropological, problem. Man is a creature capable of deceiving himself, *particularly when he believes he is rational*. That is when he becomes the most irrational of all. In fact, Dostoevsky exposes rationalism—as an “-ism”, an ideological construct to be believed in and worshipped — as supremely irrational. Again, a Dostoevskian villain is a great testimony here. In *Crime and Punishment*, the murderer Raskolnikov is devising a very complex plot to murder the old woman, but the more things get out of control, the more he believes — or desperately tries to convince himself in a series of incantations — that everything is rationally calculated, and therefore fail-proof. He plans to kill an old woman who is vicious and ends up also killing her saintly sister, of whose murder he even almost forgets — all the while believing that “everything is under control”! The more he idolizes rationalism, the less rational he becomes, and the less rationally he behaves. Taboos stop him since, in Dostoevsky, they are internal and therefore, they designate to himself the inviolable realm of his conscience. They pertain to the crime he *can commit but cannot bring himself to mention*, and not when he is with others but when he remains face-to-face with his conscience, or with Sonia who represents it in his eyes. He can refer to the murder when teasing a young investigator Zametov but not when he is alone or with Sonia. Then he euphemizes: “*that house, that old woman, that dream, then the sun will shine just the same way, that money, not that but something else...*” All these pronouns, italicized in the original, refer to one and the same thing, too painful to mention directly — the murder, its victim/s, and its scene. The murder itself, although already *committed* and reinforced with another (that of Lizaveta), remains *impossible to mention* directly. The man aspiring to prove the then-fashionable Napoleonic idea (a great man is allowed to do immoral things for a lofty cause) cannot silence his conscience, because it addresses him from *within* this silence, *not as an external* voice of a persecuting policeman, the law, the state, or anyone official. In fact, when they try to catch him, Raskolnikov forgets about his conscience and only remembers to

escape — like a hunted beast. But when he is left face-to-face with his conscience, he has no place to escape! Since it all is done through what he can or cannot say, we become implicated in his pangs of conscience as much as in his guilt, and even crime!

It has been said that the history the last hundred years has simply been the unfolding of the great ideologies of the XIX century: scientism, socialism, individualism, progressivism. While all of them at some level present an option for atheism, what was clear to Dostoevsky is that what is really at stake in the modern world is humanity. Paradoxically, the attempt to remove God ends up eliminating humanity, by denying that most profound dimension of our being which is freedom.

Now, a quick side comment here. It was Nikolai Berdiaev, a great champion of Dostoevsky and of freedom and Russian *Christian Existentialism*, who, in his *Existential Dialectics of the Human and the Divine*, announced: “In and of himself, man is not really human, or humane; he is rather inhuman(e). It is God who is human [and humane: the same word here]”. It is no accident, therefore, that that philosopher was under such an influence of Dostoevsky’s poetics—specifically of his Christian *anthropology* — of what it means to be human in the light of Godmanhood, of God becoming Man.

Dostoevsky realized that to be human means to be a relationship with the Infinite, with the Mystery, which calls to mind a quote from The Possessed which was dear to Fr. Giussani, "The whole law of human existence consists of making it possible for man to bow down before what is infinitely great. If man were to be deprived of the infinitely great, he would refuse to go on living, and die of despair."

Another villain comes to mind here — the Underground Man. He at least knew he was irrational but he longed for God. Many readers of Dostoevsky believe that *Notes from the Underground* is an atheistic work, a work where Dostoevsky could no longer pretend he believed in God. This belief was shared by his publishers, Leo Shestov, many French Existentialists and *their* followers, and many, many more readers, far less careful. Yet an interesting and unexpected Biblical intertext demonstrates that the Underground Man is longing for something sacred, something worthy of veneration. Of the Crystal Palace — the symbol of the achievements of human civilization at the time, as well as something akin to the Tower of Babel, in Dostoevsky’s eyes — the Underground Man says: “let my hand wither if I bring a single brick to build such a building! O, don’t get me wrong, it is not any building I am resisting! Quite the contrary — I wish I could find a building that would be worthy of my contributed brick — I would even gladly let them cut off my tongue, if I only could find such a building!” These “let my hand wither” and “I would gladly let them cut off my tongue” both echo Psalm 137:5-6: “If I forget thee o Jerusalem, let my right hand wither, let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember thee”. But these verses, like the whole Psalm 137 — very important to Dostoevsky and quoted more directly in *The Brothers Karamazov* — are

about preserving what is sacred to God's people, preserving at any price! Well, I already have an article on this topic, so let us cut this discussion short here.

This deprivation of the Mystery, and thus the withering away of freedom, is truly the predicament of modern man. But the Mystery does not give up on us, and keeps creeping back into history and calling our freedom back to Himself. Few writers have been as aware of this drama as Dostoevsky, and for this reason he is for us still today a guide and a teacher of humanity.

Here again, I believe it is crucial to remember that Dostoevsky's characters looking for a chance to worship God and His mystery are not saints but villains — just like us. Let us turn to what he does to his readers in relation to his villains. Unbeknownst to ourselves, we become them.

The Brothers Karamazov.

Warning: For those of you who haven't read the novel, this contains a spoiler, alas. But since we are addressing the technique Dostoevsky uses to implicate his readers in his villains' humanity, such spoilers are inevitable: we must closely examine that which, as readers, we admit to our subconscious mind alone. Let us hope that this spoiler will be suspended. In any case, it is Dostoevsky's trademark device, to hide things in plain view.^{xiii} My reading of the villain in his last novel will only demonstrate this tendency. So:

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, there are four brothers, not three, but we forget about the fourth, as he is a bastard and the family's lackey.

This bastard, whose brotherhood with the others is narratively minimized, also happens to be *the actual murderer* of their father. While the characters, and the readers, remember, or discover, or come to believe, that he is the murderer, they also forget that he *may be something besides* being the lackey. We (yes—we: you and I, dear reader!) come to ignore him, his plea, his pain, and consequently, even his motive for the murder, as much as the characters in the book ignore him and all his motives. This makes us as responsible for his being the murderer as those characters who ignore him (everyone in the book).

The chief taboo in *The Brothers Karamazov* is on the idea that Smerdiakov is equal to the other brothers as the fourth son of Fedor Pavlovich. The narrator pretends there are other possibilities for fathering Smerdiakov (e.g., the so-called "Karp-with-the-screw" -- a convict vagabond. In the chapter which relates the story of Smerdiakov's birth, the narrator, who hitherto was quite straightforward about describing Fedor Pavlovich's outrageous treatment of women, all of a sudden becomes squeamish and enigmatic, emphasizing that he is not omniscient and citing rumors as the only source of his information on the issue (XIV:92). The narrator also masks the obvious importance of Smerdiakov in the novel's plot quite transparently, almost admitting that he

just pretends to mask it. Chapter 2 of Book 3 in Part I ("The Stinking Lizaveta") ends with the narrator's statement that, although "one should add something about him [Smerdiakov] especially, [he is] ashamed to distract his reader's attention for such ordinary lackeys for such a long time — " and says he hopes that "concerning Smerdiakov, it will, somehow, come by on its own (*kak-nibud' sojd.t samo soboiu*) in the future course of the narration" (XIV:93)

Here Dostoevsky borrows Gogol's technique. For instance, Gogol refuses to describe Selifan in Part I, Chapter 2 of *Dead Souls*: "Selifan the coachman was quite a different person... But the author is greatly ashamed of occupying his readers for so long with people of the low estate, knowing from personal experience how reluctantly they [the readers] get acquainted with the lower estates."^{xiii} Gogol's sole purpose, however, was to tease his reader, whereas, as I will argue, Dostoevsky actually considers Smerdiakov a very important character and his "quite ordinary lackeyhood" a very important motif in the novel. This regard is betrayed by the novel's structure, while it seems to be minimized by its style and method of narration. Apologizing for distracting the readers' attention from matters more serious than Smerdiakov, the *narrator* actually distracts attention from the importance which the *author* does ascribe to Smerdiakov. Many very smart readers and critics "bought into" the narrator's deliberately misleading comment, and believed that Dostoevsky indeed made Smerdiakov a marginal character. One, E.I. Kijko, for instance, thinks that Dostoevsky decided not to discuss Smerdiakov at a key point in the novel because "these details were not relevant to the meeting which took place between Alesha and Mitia." Kijko also says that Dostoevsky changed the plan of the novel to eliminate "the deviation of the plot from the main line."^{xiv} I believe that Smerdiakov's story cannot be a "deviation of the plot from the main line" because he is *the murderer* and as such the patricide, ensuring that the novel *as a whole* rightly belongs to the patricide genre. So his story is the main line of the plot, which Dostoevsky chose to *mask* as a deviation.

THREE OR FOUR BROTHERS?

Smerdiakov's sonship to Fedor Pavlovich, awkward as it is, is at least mentionable. The prosecutor says that Smerdiakov "possibly is an illegitimate son of Fedor Pavlovich's" (XV:126); Fetiukovich (the defense lawyer) states that, at least, he considers himself to be one (XV:165). Objecting to the suggestion that Smerdiakov was the murderer, Mitia also says that this relationship is possible (XIV:428). A *related* idea, however, is absolutely unmentionable, and this is the possibility of Smerdiakov's being the fourth *brother* to the three brothers Karamazov. The word "brother" is used very densely *around* Smerdiakov's name, but this word never refers to him, as if surrounding him with a field of magnetic immunity. The fact that Alesha blames him for the murder is ascribed to Alesha's *brotherly* sentiments, or, as the persecutor puts it, "moral convictions of sorts, which are so natural in his capacity as the defendant's blood brother" (*v silu kakikh-to npravstvennykh ubezhdenij, stol' estestvennykh v ego kachestve rodnogo brata podsudimogo*) (XV:109). Katerina Ivanovna says that Ivan blamed Smerdiakov for the murder because "he could not bear that his blood brother [i.e., Mitia!] was a patricide" (XV:121, cf. also

XV:135,136). Alesha and Ivan have enough of a brotherly sentiment to serve as a motive for lying but Smerdiakov cannot be considered a brother to them, or to Mitia, even in that context!

We, readers, also often forget that not only Smerdiakov but Mitia as well was only a half brother to Ivan and Alesha. (Mitia's mother was Fedor Pavlovich's first wife, not second). Thus even Robert Belknap, my life-long teacher, a very careful reader of the novel, says of Smerdiakov: "[T]he murderer is no more than a half brother, a relationship that enables him to be a servant too."^{xv} If Smerdiakov's half-brotherhood is the factor that enables him to be both a servant and the murderer, then why does not the same factor enable Mitia to be either?

Smerdiakov himself actively *dissociates* himself from the Karamazov brotherhood — so actively, in fact, that it becomes clear that he is sure he is one of them. Smerdiakov creates a field of magnetic immunity around any designation of himself as one of the brothers. The following example will explain what I mean.

When Alesha tells Ivan of his worry about his brother Mitia, Ivan says: "Am I my brother Dmitry's keeper?" (XIV:211). He immediately proceeds to explicitly comment that these words were "Cain's response to God about his slaughtered brother." Five pages earlier, however, Alesha asks Smerdiakov: "Is brother Dmitry to return soon?" — without specifying *whose* brother Dmitry is (which is, idiomatically, as acceptable in Russian as it is, in this case, in English). Smerdiakov, however, sweeps away a mere suggestion that Mitia might be considered *his* brother. As if overdoing Alesha's own presumptions, he gives an *exaggeratedly servile* response typical of a lackey alone: "Why is it that I could be informed about Dmitry Fedorovich; it would be quite a different matter if I were attached to them [the Russian substitute for "him," reserved exclusively for the expression of servility] as a keeper (*Pochemu zhe by ia mog byt' izvesten pro Dmitriia Fedorovicha; drugoe delo, kaby ia pri nikh storozhem sostoial.*)" — delivering these words, servile as they may be, "distinctly and *slightingly*" (*razdel'no i prenebrezhitel'no* -- XIV:206^{xvi}). The sole purpose of Smerdiakov's servile tone is to demonstrate that he means a relationship with both his listener (Alesha) and the subject of his conversation (Mitia), which is the exact opposite of what he explicitly states. His use of the Biblical reference to Cain's words about Abel is much more subliminal than Ivan's. Yet it is precisely this avoidance of the direct reference which ensures the efficacy of the intertext by causing the reader some irrational associative discomfort. Smerdiakov's reference to Cain's words is more effective than Ivan's precisely because, and insofar as, it is less direct. I am convinced that when Dostoevsky cites or stylizes the Scriptures directly, without transforming either the style or the context, he aims much less at conveying a pious message, or correlating his message with that of the Bible, than when he actually "distorts" the style of the Biblical intertext or alters its context.^{xvii} Here I also part with Diane Thompson's view that "Zosima quotes the Bible accurately, Fyodor travesties it and Smerdyakov corrupts it."^{xviii} In this passage Smerdiakov travesties and corrupts the drama of Cain's words much less than Ivan does by quoting Cain directly. Like many sacred realities, Biblical quotes in Dostoevsky often are preserved sacred only if their direct, uncorrupted version is *tabooed*. Interestingly, even travesty violates this taboo to a lesser extent than direct quotation.

G.S. Morson, nearly the only critic who considers Smerdiakov's neglected brotherhood as important as I do, regards the episode to which I just referred as "perhaps the most important scene for understanding Smerdiakov's motives," revealing "how even Alyosha contributes to the tragedy."^{xix} Morson believes that this scene shows that Smerdiakov "ruins his brothers because they do not acknowledge him as a brother" (*idem*), and he regards the way in which Smerdiakov invokes the Biblical verse 'am I my brother's keeper' as an expression of "murderous irony," "a revenge for his epithets, because he is never called 'Brother Pavel,' but 'the valet Smerdyakov' or (as he poisonously recalls Ivan's phrase) 'the stinking lackey.'" (*idem*). Actually, Smerdiakov's practice of "poisonous irony" is an act of tabooing. In the following passage, mentioning the fact that Smerdiakov refers to Cain's words, Morson does not say that Smerdiakov alters the Biblical verse so as to avoid using the word "brother:"

Smerdyakov (who calls his brother Dmitri Fedorovich) responds with murderous irony that he is not his brother's keeper [emphasis mine. O.M.]. The reference to the first fratricide [...] obliquely reminds Alyosha that while the Biblical phrase is conventionally used in an extended sense to refer to one's fellow man, in this case Dmitri really *is* Smerdyakov's brother (*idem*).

In adherence to the law of taboos as signalers of what really matters, Smerdiakov's irony is indeed murderous but literally rather than metaphorically. Smerdiakov, like Cain, actually plans and commits a murder. Morson's analysis of Smerdiakov's tone is then precise to the point of literalness. Yet his citation of Smerdiakov's words is not literal. Smerdiakov does *not* say "am I my brother's keeper," but rather: "it would be quite a different matter if I were attached to *my sir* Dmitri Fedorovich as a keeper." Smerdiakov pretends to ward off any association between Mitia and himself as brothers: "*What 'brother'?! Dmitri Fedorovich, my master's firstborn son!*" Like Petrov and other Dostoevskian tabooers and murder-tabooing murderers, Smerdiakov *de-idiomatizes* and de-automatizes the Biblical cliché in order to signal that the word "brother," accurate as it may be, is *unmentionable*, as long as one might possibly interpret it as pertaining to him, Smerdiakov. Thus Smerdiakov's "murderous irony" actually fulfills a tabooing function. By forbidding any association between himself, a lackey, and brotherhood to Dmitri, it actually draws attention to this very association as unmentionable.

Zosima emphasizes the Biblical motif of Joseph and his *brothers* (XIV:266), mentioning specifically that "for his whole life Joseph tirelessly remembered how he was sold... and wept and implored his brothers not to sell him" (*ibid.*). The Biblical plot stresses the fact that the brothers did not recognize Joseph when they came to Egypt for his bread. (The whole subplot of Benjamin and the chalices evolves around this motif.) Zosima refers to this Biblical motif when he mentions that Joseph, "not being able to endure the torment of his heart,... comes out to them, beaming and bright and announces to them: 'Brethren, I am Joseph, your brother!'" (*ibid.*). The brothers Karamazov also do not recognize Smerdiakov as *their* brother. Like Joseph, Smerdiakov also feeds his father and his brothers whenever they are around. The careers of both in society depend entirely on how well they feed people. The difference between these two betrayed and

unrecognized brothers is that Smerdiakov is abominable while Joseph is wonderful. But the similarity between the two suggests more than a mere parody. It also implies that neglecting a bad brother is not any better morally than neglecting a good one — and the further development of the plot suggests that neglecting a bad brother is also more dangerous than neglecting a good one. Smerdiakov may not exactly be Joseph, but his brothers still abuse him as carelessly as Joseph's brothers abused *him*.

The novel shows such brotherly neglect as unambiguously bad. Like Joseph's brothers, certain evil characters in the novel also wickedly ignore their siblings' brotherhood. One of Rakitin's obvious points of baseness is that he denies his cousinship (in Russian, secondary brotherhood — *dvoiurodnoe bratstvo*) with Grushenka and gets annoyed when Alesha calls her his (Alesha's) sister. Ivan is filled with indignation when Fedor Pavlovich forgets that Alesha's mother was his mother too. Fedor Pavlovich, indeed, forgets this fact, and looks all the worse for that (XIV:127). In the case of Smerdiakov, however, nobody looks bad overlooking *his* relationship to them — only he himself. (Talk about blaming the victim!) The value of noticing and cherishing one's brotherhood to someone — both biological and spiritual, as, for example, in the case of Alesha and Grushenka — seems to apply to everyone *but* Smerdiakov. While forgetting other relatives is a sin, forgetting Smerdiakov seems acceptable, to the reader as much as to the characters. Every character and most readers feel so comfortable *forgetting* about the importance of Smerdiakov, his childhood and his memories of this childhood. Even Belknap, who first started considering the ways in which Dostoevsky uses his structures to morally implicate his readers,^{xx} does not mention everyone's neglect of Smerdiakov as a moral fault.

Diane Thompson lists Smerdiakov among important forgotten and neglected orphans in the novel.^{xxi} Thompson, however, regards Smerdiakov as a symbol, rather than a pitiable victim or object of oblivion which she considers demonic.^{xxii} Among the reasons for which Smerdiakov cannot possibly remember his parents, Thompson mentions that Fedor Pavlovich never openly acknowledges him as his son.^{xxiii} In Thompson's interpretation, *this* memory-lapse seems to be entirely Smerdiakov's fault, not Fedor Pavlovich's (Thompson, 201). Thompson even goes so far as to maintain that Smerdiakov "never was a son or brother" (*idem*). Readers as careful as Perlina, Belknap, Thompson, and many others, "stumble over" Smerdiakov. The general tendency, in his case, is to blame the victim.

Many other people also stumble over him. Mitia calls Smerdiakov a *smerd* (meaning "a stinking peasant" but also a metaphor for a plebeian). Brothers Mitia and Ivan use this word to refer to other people besides Smerdiakov. Ivan uses it to refer to the base mob: "I do not want plebeians (*smerdy*) to praise me [for my magnanimity toward Mitia]" (XV:87). Mitia labels Rakitin (XV:28) and the average American (XV:186) with this word. In all of these cases, the word is the antonym to "brother" and excludes its referent from the universal brotherhood. But Dostoevsky-*the plot-maker* (unlike his *narrator*) actually finds a way to compromise this exclusion — which, should it remain intact, would first and foremost concern Smerdiakov, if only because of his name, a cognate to *smerd*-the-plebeian. The structure involves the role of the motif

of stinking in the plot. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, stinking is not *morally* bad. It is Lizaveta and Zosima who stink; both are saintly, and in both cases, abominating them is the moral responsibility of those who abominate them, rather than of themselves. Mme. Khokhlakova, after Zosima stinks posthumously, says, "I never expected such a respectable elder to commit such an act!" It is she, not Zosima, who looks like a complete idiot there! The possible subtextual rehabilitation of stinking may come from the Gospel motifs of both Lazaruses — the resurrected and the poor one generally associated with the resurrected one in popular consciousness, at least in Russia. (There is a folk song subtext to the novel, and even specifically to the motif of brotherly neglect, making this association clear and relevant, but I have no time to explore it here).

Yet even keeping Smerdiakov company as a fellow stinker does not prevent Zosima himself — the righteous man in the novel — from neglecting "the lackey"! Zosima preaches that one's servants are one's brothers (XIV:285, 271-287). He says that simple folk should consider themselves not "lackeys" but equal to their masters (XIV:286), and he admonishes masters, urging them to make their servants equal to themselves, "freer in spirit than if they were not servants" (XIV:287-8). These words suggest that even when one's servants are not one's biological brothers, they should be considered brothers. But Smerdiakov *is* the Karamazovs' biological brother, and yet they all ignore and/or dismiss this fact. Zosima never regards Smerdiakov as one of the brothers Karamazov. He asks Alesha if he saw "the brother," meaning not Ivan but "*the* other brother" (XIV:258). This means that among Alesha's brothers Zosima considers Mitia the only alternative to Ivan. Alesha, Grushenka, and Ivan call Smerdiakov "a lackey." Ivan labels him "lackey" and "cad" (XIV:122) in the chapter "Sipping Cognac" -- precisely when Smerdiakov believes he has started developing Ivan's ideas. Ivan cites the devil (actually saying things not the way the devil said them but the way he himself thinks of them): "You [Ivan -- O.M.] will announce that... *the lackey*, having learned from you, killed the father" (XV:87. NB: *Whose* father -- "yours" or "the lackey's" -- remains unspecified). Alesha refers to Dmitry as his brother and to Smerdiakov as "the lackey", several times (XV:108-109, 189). When Kolia Krasotkin asks him if the murderer "was his brother or the lackey," Alesha answers quite unambiguously and tersely: "*ubil lakej, a brat nevinoven*" ("The murderer was the lackey and the brother is innocent" -- XV:189). The reader scores this definiteness of answer in Alesha's favor because Alesha is confident about Mitia and does not succumb to any temptations of calumny. But both the reader and the characters, Alesha and Kolia, entirely forget that "the lackey" is also "a brother." Alesha's spiritual sister Grushenka echoes these words (*lakej ubil*) several times (in XV:9-10 and 114). Alesha and Grusha are morally transformed and elevated by calling each other brother and sister, and yet, they, just like Ivan and Mitia, stumble over calling Smerdiakov *their* brother.

Ivan's concern about suffering children also applies to everyone but Smerdiakov. The suffering of children prompts Ivan to *return his ticket to God*. But when the narrator describes the twelve-year-old Smerdiakov, he mentions that Smerdiakov liked to hang cats — which, naturally, is abominable, but which, somehow, *de facto*, manages to justify Grigory's awfully inhuman words addressed to the boy: "You are not a human being, you were bred out of bathhouse dampness, that's who you are..." (XIV:114). The narrator mentions quite matter-of-factly that

Smerdiakov "could never forgive these words," which resembles Zosima's words about the Biblical Joseph which I already quoted (XIV:266). Yet that same narrator does not seem to have any compassion for Smerdiakov. When Smerdiakov gets rebellious about the light-creation story in the Bible, Grigory beats him and thereby causes his epilepsy. This fact seems to evoke only Fedor Pavlovich's pity, which, like any other behavior in Fedor Pavlovich, seems only odious, but does not visibly score any points in *Smerdiakov's* favor (XIV:115). All this happens when Smerdiakov is just barely twelve. And yet, it is not because of him that Ivan — who seems to lose sleep over the suffering of innocent children — returns his ticket to God. The injustice done to his own half-brother Smerdiakov, "the lackey and the cad", somehow eludes Ivan's (and everyone else's) indignation.

Finally, the most important issue in the novel's plot also stumbles over the Smerdiakov phenomenon. Zosima says that one should not judge or condemn a transgressor because the judge is responsible for the transgression of the judged (XIV:290-291). Nobody, including the reader, seems to apply this key concept to Smerdiakov, except maybe Ivan, who actually is worried about his influence on Smerdiakov only because he is forced by the events and by Smerdiakov's own reproaches. Yet Alesha carefully taboos this worry with the incantation-like words "It is not you who killed!" (Bk.11, ch.5).

This tabooing incantation would itself suffice to signal the importance of Ivan's responsibility for Smerdiakov's crime. But the signal concerns only Ivan's conscience, and it prevents the reader from thinking that Alesha might also mean himself as another brother of Smerdiakov's — and, who knows, perhaps all of us? Certainly, Ivan's obsessed words, "if Smerdiakov killed then I did" can refer to all of us, especially since Zossima is preaching that all people are responsible for one another. It is only the narrative tricks that make us forget to include Smerdiakov in this society of mutual responsibility! But he is precisely the one who commits the crime! So brotherly neglect is not something the novel preaches against but an experience it drags as through. And yet, this possibility of *both* brothers' joint responsibility for Smerdiakov — Alesha's as well as Ivan's — is tabooed because the only reason for Ivan's worry is his *ideological* influence on Smerdiakov — rather than his, or the other brothers' (Dmitri and Alesha's), *brotherly* responsibility for "the lackey." Here too, the ideological plane of the novel obscures or somehow splits from, its spiritual level. Spiritually, it matters less that Ivan was an *intellectual* influence over Smerdiakov, than that he neglected him as a *brother*.

Why should the key values of the novel be applicable to everyone but Smerdiakov? Why should Dostoevsky make him Fedor Pavlovich's illegitimate son in the first place? Why should the association with stinking be redeemed for Zosima and Smerdiakov's own holy fool of a mother yet not for Smerdiakov himself? Why should Dostoevsky raise the concern for everyone's responsibility for their neighbor's iniquity — and then reveal as the murderer the one person whom nobody considers his or her neighbor, let alone a biological brother?

Of course, unlike the good and brotherly Russian peasants, Smerdiakov hates his people, his mother, and the story of his birth, and unlike the meek Alesha, the suffering theoretician Ivan, and

the passionate-yet-good-hearted Mitia, “the lackey” is petty and obsessed with himself and his own illegitimacy. But he takes Ivan's atheism and Mitia's parricidal impulses more seriously and wholeheartedly than the brothers themselves do (a common motif of the temptor-tempted relation in *Demons* as well), and when he sees the ideological failure of his enterprise — manifest in the fact that Ivan is not with him — he is utterly crushed. Yet Dostoevsky-the plot-maker — unlike the wholly unsympathizing narrator — provides Smerdiakov with a glimpse of redemption: after he is ideologically and emotionally crushed, he begins to read Saint Isaak the Syrian — a great ascetic father known for his appeals to pray for the devil. As Grigorij Pomerants puts it in his book, “Behold, Smerdiakov has finally found his heavenly intercessor.”^{xxiv}

After his ideological crisis, Smerdiakov manages to universalize his brotherhood, but in a way that prevents others from seeing this as he does. Ivan asks him: “Did you really think that everyone was such a coward as you?” Smerdiakov responds: “Forgive me, sir, I thought you, too, were like me” (“*Prostitute-s, podumal, chto i vy, kak i ia*” -- XV:46). Smerdiakov's tone here smacks of more philosophical sincerity than Ivan's question actually requires, displays, or presupposes. For no other character except Smerdiakov would thinking his half-brother similar to himself require asking forgiveness, sincerely or in jest, with “murderous irony”. Here the reader should begin to consider Smerdiakov's disadvantaged position in relation to his brothers. Of course, Ivan is not “just like him.” He is a much higher version of Smerdiakov than Smerdiakov himself. Specifically, he is not as cowardly as Smerdiakov is (or not definitely). The concrete context of Ivan's question, therefore, undermines, or attempts to undermine, the global significance and the pathos of Smerdiakov's answer. The answer itself, in turn, seems to go over the limits of the specific context. Its deliberate generality suggests that Ivan forgets that he and Smerdiakov are *fundamentally* equal, as humans, whether one is more cowardly than the other or not. This objection considered, it is interesting that in the notebooks the tone of Smerdiakov's response was much more befitting that of Ivan's question in that it was more concrete and less rhetorically pompous than in the final version: “Ivan: “You think everyone is a coward like you. Smerdiakov: “Forgive me, sir [I] thought that you too were *scared* like myself” (*Prostitute-s, podumal, chto i vy boites', kak i ia* -- XV:330).

This last preliminary version resembles the final one in every detail, except for the expression “are scared” (*boites'*), which immediately deprives the sentence of its pathos and loftiness, thus reducing the scale of its significance. People are alike only in the most general way, and it is only in this way that Smerdiakov may legitimately pretend to any likeness with Ivan, even as his brother! The moment he compares his particular feature, such as cowardice, to the same feature of Ivan's, he is wrong. This wrongness would fit in the context of Ivan's question. But judging from the change which Smerdiakov's response underwent from the notebooks to the final version, Dostoevsky would rather have Smerdiakov's response transcend the context of Ivan's question than fit into it. That way he would endow Smerdiakov with some awareness of his own brotherly dignity, while also hiding *from the reader* the importance of that awareness, or letting the narrator ever approve of the author's benevolence toward “the lackey.”^{xxv}

In light of this passage, some other seemingly accidental ambiguities also begin to look suspicious. They subliminally imply that there is something wrong in the brothers' constant dissociation of themselves from Smerdiakov. Thus, at one point when Ivan sees Smerdiakov, he "realizes that in his soul, too, there is a lackey Smerdiakov" (*...ponial, chto i v dushe ego sidel lakej Smerdiakov...*" -- XIV:242). Russian grammar is ambiguous as to whether it is "*a* lackey-Smerdiakov" or "*the* lackey Smerdiakov." The possibility of the first meaning suggests that there is a Smerdiakov in Ivan's soul. The context allows for both possibilities. On the one hand, the fact that Ivan just saw Smerdiakov before he realized "that Smerdiakov was in his soul" seems to imply the meaning of "*the* lackey." The word order in Russian, however, allows for "*a* lackey," too. On second thought, the reader begins to consider the possibility that even the context itself might suggest "a lackey": one might interpret the passage as pertaining to two different Smerdiakovs -- one outside Ivan, sitting on the bench, and the other inside him, sitting in his soul: "There was Smerdiakov the lackey sitting on the bench at the gate and cooling himself with the evening air, and Ivan Fedorovich [...] understood that in his soul, *too* (my emphasis -- O.M.: "*i v dushe ego*") there sat a (?) lackey-Smerdiakov" (XIV:242). The ambiguity between "the lackey" and "a lackey" suggests the same thing that Zossima preaches overtly: one is responsible for another's sins because one shares the other's sinfulness. Ignoring Smerdiakov's brotherhood, Ivan begins to share in his lackeyhood.

The consistency with which the brothers Karamazov *and* the narrator dislike or neglect Smerdiakov implicates the reader in the characters' taboo on the idea that Smerdiakov too participates in universal brotherhood. The narrator's consistently unsympathizing tone concerning Smerdiakov makes the taboo work uniformly -- not only in the minds and for the purposes of the brothers Karamazov, but for the reader as well. As a result -- if the reader accepts the idea of universal human brotherhood, which I believe is a very important value in the novel -- the reader ignores Smerdiakov as a possible brother -- and thereby is urged to share in at least some of the characters' moral responsibilities in the novel.

In *The Brothers Karamazov* Dostoevsky created solidarity of moral responsibility between his characters and his reader, and even his narrator, by forcing them to ignore things together. For this purpose, Smerdiakov and the taboo on any sympathy or sense of brotherhood — of any kind — toward him are essential for Dostoevsky-the plot-maker. Otherwise, one would be urged to believe that Dostoevsky needed Smerdiakov only as a villain and scapegoat — an idea unlikely for a novel which teaches one not to judge by appearances.

Paradoxically, *The Brothers Karamazov*, a novel that, according to Diane Thompson, ascribes immense significance to shared cultural and personal memories,^{xxvi} also demonstrates the immense consequences of an *unshared* memory—that of a son forgotten by his brothers, i.e., all of us, a memory which the brother in question alone possesses and cherishes.

In Dostoevsky, no sinner is a he or a she, but everyone is I myself. Like Dante's, Dostoevsky's hope is that of every Christian: that by undergoing the sinner's torments together with him, by experiencing his pangs of conscience first hand, we contemplate our own sins. If his

poetics answers the basic anthropological question — what is a human being? — the answer is the following: man is an animal capable of repentance — but only as long as he forbids himself to engage in condemnation.

ⁱ. Cf. *ibid*, 16; also: IV:294-296; also: Moisej Al'tman, "Pestrye zametki" in Bazanov, v.3, p.18ff. Al'tman discusses the symbolism of bathhouse in Dostoevsky's other works as well; also: Shestov, 44; also: Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky. The Stir of Liberation*, Princeton University Press, 1986, p. 225. Cf. also: R.L. Jackson, *The Art of Dostoevsky*, 35-40; also: R. L. Jackson's article in the *Festschrift to Joseph Frank*, Stanford University Press, 1991.

ⁱⁱ. Cf. also *ibid*, 20: "Dostoevsky has consistently endowed his characters engaged in dialogue [...] with the ability to interpret not only verbal utterances but gesture as well, as though it were also a highly formalized (that is, codified) system of communication."

ⁱⁱⁱ. Cf. the reference to the Academy Edition commentary earlier in my notes, as well as the reference to Robert Jackson's article. Jackson distinguishes very carefully between the two layers of hell-symbolism in the passage, and in the book as a whole -- the purely social, as opposed to the metaphysical. Cf. also R.L. Jackson, *The Art of Dostoevsky*, pp. 35, 37, 40.

^{iv}. "Wise Thief" (*razbojnik blagorazumnyj*) is an Orthodox liturgical term originating with the Holy Friday Mattins Exapostilarion.

^v. Dostoevsky points out that Gorianchikov also has murdered his wife, but Gorianchikov's preoccupation with the class alienation between him and the "simple folk" often lets in the voice of a political prisoner resembling Dostoevsky himself psychologically. When the narrator violates the taboo to which "simple folk" (i.e., murderers and robbers) are sensitive, his voice begins to resemble the voice of a political prisoner like Dostoevsky himself rather than a murderer from the class of the nobility. (The transparency of masking his main character as a non-political prisoner suggests that he made a point of paying merely lip service to censorship). Shestov, among other authors, also discusses the problems of the inconsistency of Gorianchikov's persona (Shestov, 51-54). I believe that Dostoevsky wanted his readers to forget that, technically, he made Gorianchikov a murderer, although he also needed to distinguish between Gorianchikov and his relatively omniscient "publisher" (Cf. Belknap, 1990, 59, and also my reference to Belknap's argument later in this chapter).

^{vi}. I am indebted to Horst-Juergen Gerigk for my interest in the story of "Akul'ka's Husband" as a signal of tabooing. In a letter (April 1996) Gerigk thus formulates his view of the inserted story: "the narrator's crime is presented in a hidden way, when he is listening to the story of 'Akul'kin muzh'."

^{vii}. A very marked violation of this taboo -- and in literature even more than in in life, a marked violation signals the presence of a taboo -- occurs in *The Gambler*. Despite the scandalous behavior of virtually all of the characters in this novel (with the exception of Mr. Astley whose good manners shock one as a form of scandalous acceptance of other people's scandalous behavior) two characters mark (by mocking) the impropriety of another's behavior only once. When the General completely (clinically) loses his mind over Mlle. Blanche, he suddenly starts lecturing the gambler about morality and its degradation among young people. This moralizing causes both the gambler and Mlle. Blanche herself to laugh sincerely. Here Dostoevsky signals the taboo on judging others by making its violator look scandalous and buffoonish even compared to the other scandalous characters in a book full of scandalous scenes.

^{viii}. Cf. *Problemy Poetiki Dostoevskogo*, 214 ff.

ix. Cf. Chirkov, *idem*.

x. Cf. Dmitry Chizhevsky (Dmitrij Chizhevskij), "Dostoevskij-psikholog" in *O Dostoevskom*, A.L. Bem, ed., v.2, Prague, 1933, pp. 51-72, esp. 53.

xi. Cf. "The Fourth Ecumenical Council. The Council of Chalcedon. A.D. 451," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Grand Rapids (1983) Second Series, vol. 14, pp. 264-265. Cf. also the definition of the Chalcedon statement of faith in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone, Oxford U. Press (1977) 99.

xii Cf. Morson, G.S., *Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potentials in 'War and Peace'*. Morson, a specialist, among other things, on Bakhtin and Dostoevsky, ought to have said that about Dostoevsky rather than Tolstoy.

xiii... N.V. Gogol, *Sobranie sochinenij*, Moscow, 1953, vol. 5, p. 21. Robert Belknap comments on the similarity of this passage from *The Brothers Karamazov* with Gogol. Cf. Belknap, *The Structure of The Brothers Karamazov*, Mouton, The Hague, Paris, 1967 (henceforth Belknap, 1967), p.91; Belknap, *The Genesis of The Brothers Karamazov*, Northwestern, Evanston, Ill., 1990 (henceforth Belknap, 1990), p. 37.

xiv... Cf. XV:420.

xv.... Belknap, 1990, p. 65.

xvi.... The correlation between these two references to Cain's response to God in *The Brothers Karamazov* was initially observed by Natasha Chervinskaia-Beshenkovskaia.

xvii... Cf. my article on Old Testament Lamentations in "The Notes from Underground," *SEEJ*, November 1992, no. 3. In this respect I fully share the opinion of Malcolm Jones who states that in *The Brothers Karamazov*, "unless the seeds of a Christian poetics fall to the ground and die they will stand alone and be overwhelmed. If they do submit then the fruits of reconstruction are doubly rich. Malcolm Jones, *Dostoevsky after Bakhtin*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, 184.

xviii.... Thompson, 15.

xix... G.S. Morson, "Verbal Pollution in *The Brothers Karamazov*," in *Critical Essays on Dostoyevsky*, Robin F. Miller, ed., Boston, Mass. (1986) 234-242, 241.

xx... *Ibid*, 155-157. On the importance of implicating the reader in *The Brothers Karamazov* cf. also Robin F. Miller, *The Brothers Karamazov: Worlds of the Novel*, New York: Twayne Publishers (1992), *passim*, esp. 4: "Dostoevsky's reader is an implicated reader" (Miller's emphasis).

xxi.... Thompson, 161.

xxii... *Ibid*, 200ff.

xxiii... *Ibid*, 201

xxiv... Grigorij Pomerants, *Otkrytost' bezdne, etudy o Dostoevskom*, New York: Liberty Publishing House, 1989, p.136. Cf. also *ibid*, 230. Pomerants mentions that the narrator does not dwell on this fact and that "this is an off-handed comment" (*zamechanie mimokhodom*). This offhandedness testifies to the fact that the issues which Dostoevsky

considers important and those his narrator does - probably differ.

^{xxv.} ... Jakov Zundelovich, in his *Romany Dostoevskogo* (Tashkent, 1963), asserts that Dostoevsky uses his own voice in the novel. Vetlovskaja also claims that one of the narrator's functions is to endow Dostoevsky's own ideas with the air of objectivity (V.E. Vetlovskaja, *Poetika romana "Brat'ia Karamazovy"*, Leningrad: Nauka, 1977, pp.48-51). I do not believe, however, that the narrator always pronounces Dostoevsky's own ideas and that the narrator's emotional attitude toward events and characters in the novel is identical to the author's. As Belknap phrased it in his 1967 comment on Zundelovich, it is not that "Dostoevsky's own voice is often audible in the novel" but rather "that Dostoevsky's narrator often echoes Dostoevsky" (Belknap, 1967, p.77).

^{xxvi.} ... Cf. Thompson, 8; *passim*.